

Parent-Teacher Relationships among Low-Income Families

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Abstract

This paper examines parent-teacher relationships among parents with infants and toddlers. Through data gathered via brief questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, dyadic relationships between paired parents and early childhood educators were analyzed in order to identify the major themes of a typical parent-teacher relationship among ‘at-risk’ families. Through inductive analysis of the semi-structured interviews, three key themes of the dimensions of parent-teacher relationships and influences on these relationships were found. This paper focuses on one essential part of the three themes of parent-teacher relationships, communication, as well as factors that influence parent-teacher relationships both positively and negatively. Findings show, overall, that parents and teachers have an understanding that open communication helps build effective, well-functioning relationships. Parents and teachers demonstrate a desire for open bi-directional communication as well as awareness that open communication is established through multiple communication strategies. The analysis suggests that parents and teachers of infants and toddlers felt their relationships were unique due to the extensive list of topics that parents and teachers discuss with one another, which exceeds the topics discussed by primary education teachers and parents. It was found that improvements should be made to center environments and staffing structures so that the greatest number of opportunities for parents and teachers to communication is possible.

Parent-Teacher Relationships among Low-Income Families

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) there is a shortage of high-quality childcare for children in their infant and toddler years. The early childhood years are recognized as being significant for the shaping of children's futures and therefore high-quality childcare is essential (NAEYC, 2009). A major component of childcare, particularly during the infant and toddler years, is the coordination of care between the child's home and school, and parent-teacher relationships are a critical component of this coordination. The National Association for the Education of Young Children suggests that meaningful relationships between teachers and families during children's early learning years are linked to school readiness, later academic success in primary school, greater academic motivation, grade promotion, and socio-emotional skills (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark & Moodie, 2009). Therefore, discovering the essential components that foster or hinder strong parent-teacher relationships is important to optimally support home-school connections. Parent-teacher relationships are vital as they allow both parents and teachers to better understand their children, or the children in their care, respectively, ultimately supporting children's development (Reedy & McGrath, 2010).

In the current literature there is a lack of sufficient research on parent-teacher relationships among children who are birth to toddler age, therefore a more in-depth exploration is necessary to provide additional insight into parental involvement, which correlates positively with pre-literacy skills in preschool age children (Arnold, Zeljo, & Doctoroff, 2008). In addition, understanding the relationships between parents and teachers of children in low-income families may assist childcare professionals to

recognize the necessary improvements that need to be made in order to provide all children and families with optimal care. This study analyzes multiple parent-teacher relationships among low-income families with infants and toddlers in center-based childcare in order to identify the themes of relationships in such settings. Identifying themes will illuminate general areas in which parent-teacher relationships are excelling as well as areas that need improvement. Specific focus is placed on low-income families because families in poverty and/or with limited parental education are at-risk for negative child outcomes such as lower academic success and externalizing problems due to lack of resources and support (Nzinga-Johnson, Baker & Aupperlee, 2009). Gaining more insight on the dynamics of how parents, from a low SES background, work with teachers will be beneficial to help improve the learning environments of children in low-income families.

Background

Children have two major environmental influences in their lives: family and school. According to Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) these two arenas are central aspects of the child's microsystem, which is defined as the relationships and interactions the child has with his or hers immediate surroundings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The interactions between home and school (i.e., parent-teacher relationships) are part of the mesosystem. The mesosystem is the layer of the child's life that provides the connection between the structures of the child's microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The ways these two arenas interact with each other shape children's development (Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009). The dynamic between a child's home life and school life depends on the primary participants in each arena, which are the parents and teachers (Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009). Parents' and teachers' individual

beliefs and values influence not only their interactions with each other but also the child's outcomes (Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009).

Nzinga-Johnson (2009) conducted a three-year longitudinal study, analyzing teacher and family relationships and parental involvement among kindergarten children, and how factors such as race and socio-economic status (SES) altered these relationships. The results showed that both parents and teachers believed that the quality of the home-school relationship influenced parental involvement regardless of racial/ethnic and socioeconomic factors. However, the self-identified race/ethnicity of participants did effect parental involvement among African American, Latino, and less educated parents, who tended to be less involved in school than White or more educated parents.

One major limitation of this study was that parents were not asked to report on their perceived level of parental involvement or provide insight as to why they were not involved in their child's education (Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009). Participants were asked to report on their perceptions of their relationships by filling out questionnaires, teachers were asked to fill out a twelve item scale about perceived family involvement and a seven item scale on their perceived relationship with parents. Parents were asked to fill out one five-item scale on their perceptions of their relationship with their child's teacher. These questionnaires are helpful for gaining a general idea of the nature of parent-teacher relationships, however, further research needs to be done to explore parent-teacher relationships in a more thorough and in-depth manner, one that attempts to capture the day-to-day interactions among teachers and parents. The majority of studies that have explored parent-teacher relationships have focused on families with preschool age or older children. Therefore, research on parent-teacher relationships for infant and toddler

age children is also essential, as these are the very first parent-teacher relationships many families form and they may set the stage for later relationship patterns for school-age children.

A childcare center setting differs from a formal primary education setting in many ways. One of the main differences includes parent-teacher communication (Reedy & McGrath, 2010). Teachers in a primary education setting communicate with parents primarily via handwritten notes or email; face-to-face communication is left for scheduled conferences, typically occurring two to four times a year (Reedy et al., 2010). In contrast, childcare settings allow for daily communication between parents and teachers twice per day, at pick up and drop off (Reedy et al., 2010). Reedy et al. (2010) created a model of effective communication for parents and teachers in a childcare setting. The data collected to create this model consisted of a two phase process in which childcare center directors were interviewed during phase one and the common themes that emerged from those interviewed were used to modify a questionnaire that was distributed to center directors in phase two. Reedy and colleagues identified a three part continuous model that emphasizes (1) continuous and ongoing communication, (2) open, bidirectional communication, and (3) education and competence for staff. Although Reedy and McGrath's communication cycle serves as a beneficial guide for appropriate communication strategies for childcare professionals, gathering information from center directors may not provide the most accurate picture of communication practices between parents and teachers. Additional research that focuses on understanding parent-teacher relationships directly from parents and teachers can provide more specific detail. For example, one line of research could ask about the effective communication strategies and

practices that are taking place within parent-teacher relationships and how these relationships are working.

Parent-teacher relationships are ideally seen as a partnership where the parent and teacher work collaboratively in order to fully foster the child's growth and development (McGrath, 2007). Previous research has shown for some families, partnerships like this are difficult to form because of the lack of parental involvement in the early childhood years due to the inability to develop mutual open communication or overall understanding (McGrath, 2007). McGrath conducted an observational case study on parent-teacher relationships in an ethnically and economically diverse childcare center classroom with children two years of age. According to McGrath the goal of this study to was to observe all aspects of daily interactions and the meaning of these interactions in regards to specific mother-teacher relationships. Through careful analysis of these parent-teacher relationships McGrath found that parents put trust in the teachers that cared for their children, and those teachers were oblivious to the influence and power they had in their relationships with parents. Parents were more invested in building a partnership than teachers were, which created an unbalanced power dynamic (McGrath, 2007). McGrath concluded that because of the fluctuation of power no true partnership was formed between teachers and parents. McGrath's study provided valuable insight on the different expectations that mothers and teachers have when it comes to their relationships. However, McGrath's study focused solely on mother's relationships with teachers leaving out the population of fathers or other child guardians/caregivers that have relationships with their child's teachers.

Bernhard (1998) conducted a study of parent-teacher interactions in an ethnically diverse childcare setting in Canada with children ranging from ages three to six. The purpose of this study was to measure the complexity of parent-teacher relationships. Childcare teachers were interviewed and parents were put into focus groups. After analyzing, comparing, and cross-referencing the different topics discussed, qualitative data showed that childrearing strategies and goals with respect to cognition, social skills and respect for authority differed between minority teachers and parents. Bernhard's findings suggested a greater societal problem of differing socioeconomic statuses interacting without tribulations. Differences in beliefs and values can make a partnership between parents and educators difficult to form. Although it is common to see variation in values among parents and teachers (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark & Moodie, 2009), Bernhard's (1998) research was conducted in Canada more than 15 years ago; thus, it may not represent current relationships between minority parents and teachers in different settings, such as the Midwestern United States.

Current Study

Previous research has provided about a foundation for parent-teacher relationships among parents of preschoolers and kindergarteners (Bernhard, 1998; Nzinga-Johnson, 2009) but much more information is needed to understand the complexity and variability in parent-teacher relationships among low-income parents with infants and toddlers. Nzinga-Johnson (2009) and Bernhard's (1998) research provided background on minority parents and their relationships with their children's teachers, but as Reedy and McGrath (2010) illustrate, parent-teacher communication in a childcare center setting differs from parent-teacher communication in a primary education setting, due to the

frequency and opportunity for communication. Therefore, these studies cannot necessarily be applied to parents and teachers of infants and toddlers. The current study was designed to fill in the research gaps on parent-teacher relationships by examining parent-teacher relationships among parents of infant and toddler age children in center-based childcare.

Reedy and McGrath's (2010) research with center directors was helpful for developing a framework for how a strong communication cycle between parents and teachers may work; however, it may not accurately capture how parents and teachers operate in and perceive their relationships. The current study examined parent-teacher relationships by conducting individual, in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with parent-teacher pairs, and administered brief questionnaires to teachers, parents, and childcare center directors. Gathering the perspectives from parents and teachers provides multiple interpretations of opinions regarding the complex parent-teacher relationships. Unlike Nzinga-Johnson's (2009) research in which parents were not asked to report on their perceived level of parental involvement or provide insight as to why they were not involved in their child's education, this research study analyzes dyadic parent-teacher relationships, in which both the parent and the teacher speak about their views on the same relationship.

This study examined ten parent-teacher relationships among low-income families with children 12 to 36 months age. Data were gathered by administering questionnaires to teachers, parents, and childcare center directors, in addition to conducting interviews with parents and teachers. Through the analysis of questionnaire and the transcription and coding of interviews, I identified major themes within the parent-teacher relationships of

families receiving subsidized childcare. The ultimate goal of this research is to identify the multidimensional nature of parent-teacher relationships, and to ascertain areas that are flourishing and areas that may need improvement.

Previous research has identified some potentially relevant themes in parent-teacher relationships. Reedy and McGrath (2010) found that effective communication is continuous, ongoing, open, and bidirectional. Themes related specifically to minority families include families of a minority race or low income having lower parental involvement (Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009) and minority parents having conflicting opinions with teachers on early childhood education goals and child rearing methods (Bernhard, 1998). A theme that surfaced as a result of McGrath's work (2007) was that parents were significantly more interested in seeking information and advice from teachers than teachers were interested in seeking information from parents. The focus of the current study was asking parents and teachers to identify what makes their interactions work and not work. The themes identified in past research conducted with older children and with different samples were compared to the results of this study. However, the researchers wanted the relevant themes to emerge from the data, and did not make any specific hypotheses about how parents and teachers understand and work in their relationships.

Sample

The population for this study consisted of early childcare educators and parents with children twelve to 36 months old that receive subsidized childcare. The dyadic relationship between paired parents and early childhood educators was analyzed with the goal of identifying major themes parent-teacher relationship among 'at-risk' families that

are successful and areas that need improvement. The choice to focus on infant and toddler age children was made because infants and toddlers do not have the ability to adequately communicate their feelings, thoughts, and needs. Therefore, there is a significant amount of communication that must occur between early childhood educators and parents to optimally coordinate care. The research study was approved by the Behavioral and Social Sciences Institutional Review Board at The Ohio State University.

In order to gather a sample that represents the target population of ‘at-risk’ families, childcare centers in central Ohio were selected from the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services website of registered childcare centers based upon whether or not they offered subsidized care (often referred to as “Title XX”). In order to qualify for the study, teachers were required to (1) be a lead or co-lead teacher in an infant or toddler room, (2) have worked in the current classroom for at least three months, (3) be able to read and speak English. Only one lead or co-lead teacher was selected from each participating classroom. In order for families to be eligible for participation they were required to meet the following criteria: (1) the child of focus had to attend childcare for an average of at least 25 hours/week, (2) the parent must be able to read and speak English, (3) the child of focus had to be in their current classroom and with the particular teacher of focus for at least three months, and (4) the child of focus must have maintained constant residence with the identified parent for the past six months. In some cases the childcare center director identified teachers and families from that particular center that were willing to participate and fit the required criteria, whereas in other cases a member of the research team travelled to centers that had committed to participating in the study and recruited willing parents and teachers. Parents and teachers were compensated with

\$20.00 cash for participating in a brief semi-structured interview and completing a brief questionnaire. Interviews were conducted in locations convenient to the participants (i.e., in a private location at the childcare center or in participants' homes).

There were ten secured interviews and questionnaires from teachers, but only eight parents completed the required materials. At the time of the study the participating teachers' ages ranged from 24-38 years with a mean age of 30.40 years ($SD = 4.88$) for the 9 teachers that reported their age. The parents ranged in age from 27-55 years, the mean age being 33.88 years ($SD = 9.20$). The length of time the child of focus had been in the classroom ranged from 3-33 months, with a mean of 12.30 months ($SD = 9.51$). Regarding education, all parents had earned at least a high school degree or GED and 6 of the 8 total parents had at least some college course work. All teachers had at least some college course work and 5 of the 10 had bachelor's degrees or higher. The majority of parent participants (5) self-reported their race as Black/African American (2 reported as White, non-Hispanic, 1 as mixed race). The majority of the teacher participants (4) self-reported their race as Black/African American (3 reported as White, non-Hispanic, 2 as mixed race, and 1 as White, Hispanic). Out of eight total paired parent and teacher dyads half (4) had the same self-reported race, one parent reported as Black and the paired teacher reported as White, one parent reported as mixed race and the paired teacher reported as White, one parent reported as Black and the teacher reported as mixed race, one parent reported as White and the paired teacher reported as White, Hispanic, and two participants were unpaired. All teacher participants identified as female. Seven parent participants were mothers with one father participant. The mean total annual household income of the parent participants was \$15,849. These parents spent between

\$0-184.62 a week per child for childcare with a mean of \$41.50 a week per child ($SD = 59.90$). The childcare centers ranged from 1-4 stars in the State's childcare quality rating system where a 5 indicates the highest quality centers. Out of the total of 5 centers participating, 2 of them were NAEYC accredited. In questionnaires about the center completed by center directors, all 5 of the centers indicated they asked families to complete a standard questionnaire or survey about their child and/or family when they enrolled their child. Three of the 5 centers reported that greater than 90% of the families typically complete this survey, one center reported that 80-90% of families complete this survey, and one center reported that 20-40% of families complete this survey.

Data Collection

Data were gathered by administering in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with all of the parent and teacher participants. The participants were asked 6 questions: 5 inquiring specifically about interactions with the paired participant, and one about parent-teacher relationships in general. Questions were asked such as, "Please tell me about your impressions of a typical relationship between a parent and childcare teacher? What has it been like for you and _____? Please tell me about an interaction with _____ that went really well? Please tell me about an interaction with _____ that did not go well? What within the larger environment affects your ability to interact with _____?" Based upon participants' responses the interviewer asked follow-up questions for clarity. In addition to conducting interviews, brief questionnaires were given to participating center directors, parents, and early childhood educators. These questionnaires were used to gather general demographic information about the centers and participants.

Participant interviews were recorded, transcribed to a word document and checked by two separate researchers. Using an inductive approach, teacher and parent interviews were coded for common themes with the help of NVivo software. Research findings emerged from the raw data through repetitive reads, in which researchers gained familiarity and an understanding of the data (Thomas, 2006). During the coding process a model containing three key themes and influences of these themes was created in order to summarize the raw data (Thomas, 2006). Researchers were specifically interested in common qualities and interactions that supported or hindered their relationships. Researchers selected text segments and assigned these segments to the theme(s) that the content represented (Thomas, 2006). Through repetitive reads, refinement of the coding structure over time allowed us to see the most relevant and consistent aspects of these relationships (Thomas, 2006). Consistency was established during the coding process by thorough discussion of the definition of each theme and subtheme, two researchers independently coded all interviews and percent agreement was calculated.

Results

A general inductive approach was used to identify key themes (Thomas, 2006) from the parent and teacher interviews in order to create a model describing the dimensions of teacher-parent relationships. This model consists of three overarching themes (see Figure 1) as well as seven elements that influence these themes (see Figure 2). This paper will focus specifically on communication and the elements that influence parent-teacher relationships. It is important to note that the names of participants have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

Communication (Percent agreement between coders: 95.20. Mentioned by 10 teachers and 8 parents.)

Communication was defined as any exchange of information between parents and teachers. Overall, 17 out of the 18 total parent and teacher participants viewed good, open communication as important when establishing a relationship with either a childcare provider or a parent of a child in one's care. Examples of this feeling that communication is important was seen in parent interviews, for example, one parent said, "Like any relationship/partnership, there has to be good communication." There was evidence of this belief, that communication is important, in the teachers' interviews as well, one teacher, commented, "... we've been very fortunate to have we have a lot of good families that we're working with right now I just feel that we are all very open with each other."

Evidence parents want information from teachers. (Percent agreement between coders: 90.45. Mentioned by 10 teachers and 7 parents). Evidence that parents want information from teachers was seen in instances where parents intentionally sought out information from teachers or expressed the need to receive information from teachers on a regular basis. Evidence of this was seen from one parent who commented, "To me communication is very important, when it comes to your kids, I want to know everything and I want to know it all the time." This subtheme was also evident in teachers, for example one teacher noted:

"Mother asks more questions about how her child did during the day... she'll ask me as a teacher...and I've heard her ask the other teacher too, what do you think

about child's behavior in this situation ...Mother wants to get more information... from us."

Evidence teachers want information from parents. (Percent agreement between coders: 92.42. Mentioned by 10 teachers and 3 parents). Evidence that teachers want information from parents was seen in instances when teachers intentionally sought out information from parents or expressed the need to receive information from teachers on a regular basis. An example of this was seen when a teacher said, "I like to know everything that's going on at home with the baby...so when you bring em' to me I can better accommodate...if you[r] baby's sick tell me before you leave out the door so I know." This teacher shared that she wanted more information from parents so she could provide better care for their children.

Intentionally sharing information. (Percent agreement between coders: 93.40. Mentioned by 10 teachers and 3 parents). One method of communication that was seen in the interviews was where participants intentionally shared information with one another. Teachers intentionally shared information with parents generally as a strategy to elicit positive reactions from parents to establish a closer relationship, and often in the hope parents would then share more information. This method of communication was seen in the following example when a teacher said, "... getting her to talk and [feel] comfortable with us didn't take very long at all, as long as we put ourselves out there...and were open with her and we let her know how...her...children were doing." Parents intentionally shared information for different purposes. Parents typically shared information intentionally when they wanted teachers to be informed about their child so

the teacher could provide better care. One parent describes a situation where she intentionally shared information:

“I was able, I opened up to the other teacher about child's past. About her being, you know, a witness to a lot of domestic violence. So, that's probably why... she acts the way, that's why she can be so aggressive. 'Cause that's what she's been taught, like, the first year of her life. So, I was more able to open up to the- I felt the other teacher.”

Educating parents is part of the teacher's role. (Percent agreement between coders: 95.38. Mentioned by 9 teachers and 3 parents). Parents and teachers both expressed, in the interviews, that educating parents is part of the teachers' role. This is seen when teachers or parents describe a situation where a teacher feels they need to educate parents or parents feel that teachers should educate them. Teachers explained situations where they felt that they needed to educate parents about developmental milestones such as, toileting, self-feeding and switching from using a bottle to a sippy cup. One parent commented, “She lets me know developmental stages that she's achieving that I may not know about, or teaching me new things about developmental stages that I had no idea...like I didn't know about the pincher grasp, something like that and that was a good thing.” This mother appreciated the teacher explaining certain developmental stages that she was not aware of. Typically, teachers would explain to parents that their child is exhibiting behavior that shows that they are ready to start something new and the parent would either agree or disagree with the teacher.

Communication topics. (Percent agreement between coders: 83.16. Mentioned by 10 teachers and 8 parents). Communication topics refer to the subject matter that

parents and teachers discussed. Parent and teacher respondents discussed topics that focused on the child's behavior, adjustment to the classroom, potty training, etc., (see Table 1). Table 1 provides a list of all the topics discussed as well as the amount of parents and teachers that discuss each topic. The topic of the child's behavior is discussed in this interaction described by a teacher:

“There are some behaviors that kind of, looked, um, a little suspicious for um, different, um, social and emotional things that have come up. So I talked to her about it...she was very open to talk about, you know, where she may go, who she may be with and um, you know, I felt comfortable speaking with her about maybe some of the behaviors I see in her.”

Communication strategies. (Percent agreement between coders: 90.12.

Mentioned by 10 teachers and 8 parents). Communication strategies referred to the methods by which parents and teachers go about communicating with each other. Some strategies include email, texting, daily sheets, etc. (see Table 2). Table 2 provides a list of all the communication strategies as well as the amount of parents and teachers that discuss each strategy. One teacher mentioned an example of the communication strategy, in-room conversation, “Child likes to talk to the teacher at the beginning and end of the day...I always try to take the time to stop what I'm doing when child comes in.”

Influences. (Percent agreement between coders: 100. Mentioned by 10 teachers and 8 parents).

Influences were things that teachers or parents explicitly believed or implicitly implied affected or impacted parents' and teachers' relationships. Sub-topics that were seen as either influencing or impacting parent-teacher relationships included differential

relationships, time, center structure or staffing policies, family or personal factors, material goods, teacher's relationship with the child, and closeness because of infant/toddler age. Parents and teachers discussed these influences in in positive and negative ways.

Differential relationships. (Percent agreement between coders: 92.94. Mentioned by 10 teachers and 8 parents). Differential relationships include both situations: teachers see their relationships as different among different parents and parents see their relationships as different among different teachers and. Differential relationships were seen in instances where teachers indicate feeling that their relationships with individual parents in the room are different or unique. A majority of teachers saw their relationships with parents as different, but some proved to be more conflicted with the idea of having different relationships with parents. Eight out of ten teachers discussed differences among the parent-teacher relationships they have, however three of these made conflicting statements about whether their parent-teacher relationships were the same or different. When asked directly if she felt her relationships with all the parents in the room were the same or different, one teacher claimed that her relationships were the same. However, earlier in the interview she had mentioned that not all of the families in her classroom are able to have open communication because they aren't as comfortable. However, some teachers readily acknowledged that their relationships among different parents were different. One teacher noted:

I can't think of one relationship [that] is exactly the same at all...it's just different as far as communication, it's different as far as language, it's different as far as...things to talk about. I mean it's different as far as the kids."

However, a minority of teachers (2) clearly articulated similar relationships among parents. One stated:

“I would kind of say it’s the same because I try to have an open door policy with all my parents just so...they feel comfortable when they do come in and wanna talk or maybe wanna stay for a few. So I kind of have the same relationship with all of them.”

Differential relationships were also seen in instances where parents indicate feeling that their relationships with individual teachers in the room are different or unique. Seven out of eight parent participants indicated that their relationships with particular teachers are different than the relationships they have with other teachers, or that their relationships with the teacher(s) are different than the ones other parents have. One parent, expressed that relationships between other parents and teachers are different, “I’ve always said to my boyfriend, ‘ I wish parents [wouldn’t] just drop their kids up and pick them up because don’t they want to know...anything, like how was their day, what’d they eat?’” Another parent describes feeling like her relationships with various teachers in the classroom are different:

I feel like me and teacher have a...deeper...kind of a different connection because that’s my child’s primary provider...she’s the one I talk to the most...since she...predominantly talks to me about those things...we just have a different relationship than the other two teachers in the classroom.

Time. (Percent agreement between coders: 89.91. Mentioned by 10 teachers and 8 parents). Time was discussed frequently in a variety of ways, i.e., as the length of time spent at a center or with a particular teacher, time constraints or not having enough time,

the ability to spend time in the classroom, or changes occurring over time. One teacher, describes time as a negative influence:

You know sometimes at the beginning and end of the day its like you know trying to, she's got two children she's trying to...get all their stuff and like do all these things at once and you know I guess its hard with parents sometimes you know they are kind of like got all these things going on.

One parent, described a similar example: "Yeah but I can't do too many participation activities anyway unless it was like after school and after I can get my other kids together and all that so it would be hectic for me to even participate." However, time was also seen as a positive influence on parent-teacher relationships when participants discussed the length of time a particular family and teacher were able to spend and work together. A parent, describes an instance where she experiences changes in her relationship with her teacher over time:

"At first he was kind of standoff-ish 'cause... And-and he'd kind of be like, 'aghhh', you know, he didn't really know if he wanted her. But now they've actually warmed up so good that-it was so crazy 'cause the first time he actually went to her, I was just like-you know, I was taken 'back. I didn't really know-she was like, "you can leave Mom". I was like, "oh, yeah. I can leave now." [laugh] So, it was just like, okay, he's comfortable now...that took about a week or two for that to happen. But all in all I think its working out well. So I feel a lot more comfortable."

Center structure/policy and staffing structure/policy. (Percent agreement between coders: 90.51. Mentioned by 10 teachers and 8 parents). Center structure pertains to

situations in which the structure or general set up and/or atmosphere of the childcare center influenced the parent-teacher interactions. One teacher discusses feeling that her particular center set up could use improvement, “Other than... having the...conference space...where they can feel...that they can just, spill all the beans, or...say whatever they need to say; confidentially...we really don’t have that here.” Two separate teachers mentioned the size of the center as impacting their relationships. One teacher mentioned that the center was too big and has the potential to overwhelm parents whereas a separate teacher said that because the center was small there were more opportunities to converse with parents. One parent describes the positive influence of her child’s center environment:

I just think it’s a very good family environment...I think they’re very organized...you can see the love for the children and the love between each other as, uh, co-workers...it’s just a very good environment which makes the center, I believe, run very well.

The center policy included instances in which parent-teacher interactions are affected due to a center’s planned course of action in specific situations. This was typically seen as influencing parent-teacher relationships in situations where children were sick and there was a specific protocol set up for parents and teachers to follow. A few participants (both parents and teachers) described interactions in which policies were not communicated effectively to parents, which in turn led parents to feel frustrated.

Staffing structure and/or policy included the number of staff available per room, assignment of primary caregivers for children, and the time staff members’ shifts began and ended. These staffing structures and policies were generally seen by parents and

teachers as positive influences. For example, this teacher speaks positively about the staffing structure:

We're very fortunate here at our center because we typically have multiple staff members ...so we are able to...not have to focus on the other...5 or 6 children that are right there. We have someone else to help us...our ratios are very low here so we typically have more staff and [are] able to pull aside with the parent.

The following parent spoke about the staffing policy of being assigned a primary caregiver:

I feel like me and teacher have a... different connection because that's child's primary provider...teacher, she's the one who, when we have parent-teacher conferences, she's the one I talk to the most. She's the one who describes her observations.

Several parents mentioned that the low turnover of staff members is a staffing policy that has positively influenced their relationships with their child's teacher(s). Instances where staffing structure and policy influenced relationships negatively was typically seen when teachers felt like at the time certain parents came to pick up or drop off and there were not enough teachers present. A teacher participant describes the staffing structure and policy at her particular center:

If its kind of really busy and a lot of things are going on in the classroom when they're picking up and dropping off um its harder you know to focus your attention on the parent um you know there's all these things going on.

This participant continued to describe the staffing structure at her center in detail. She explained that although her infant room has three consistent staff members, their hours

“overlap” in the middle of the day, and even with the occasional “floater” teacher at the beginning or end of the day, this left her classroom with less staff, or less knowledge or helpful staff, at pick-up and drop-off times, which were times that most parents wanted to communicate with teachers.

Personal and family factors. (Percent agreement between coders: 91.13.

Mentioned by 10 teachers and 8 parents). Teachers and parents had a propensity to make assumptions about one another’s personal and family life. These assumptions typically related to personal factors (i.e., personality, race, etc.), parental or family factors, age of the parent (i.e., young, first time parent), position of the child in the family, and schedules. Personality was discussed as influencing parent-teacher interactions in both a positive and negative way, by 11 out of the 18 total participants. One teacher describes experiencing difficulty with differing personalities, “But if you have a parent that doesn’t really want to talk, or, a very guarded [parent] then, yeah...it’s a harder time connecting with them.” One parent describes a teacher’s personality that differed from her own, “that might just be her...attitude with her kids maybe a little bit not as physically intimate.” The child’s position in the family was a factor that 10 out of the 18 total participants felt influenced communication among parents and teachers. A teacher states generalizations about first time moms in the following example, “Especially if it’s their first child...They will ask questions...Like typical developmental questions.” One teacher, discusses her interactions with a first time parent:

I think it’s been...more so an up, I mean we’ve had downs, but I think it’s more so been an up. I mean, when she first came in you could tell she was like, new mom, type, deal. Cause it was, "Oh my god" you know, " I’m leaving my baby for

the first time in day care"...and so she was like just nerv', jus nervous wreck...cause she was callin' us, and stuff, so. Just...nervous, non-stop.

One parent, mentioned race as a personal factor that influenced her relationship with the teachers in her child's room. She stated that she felt more comfortable talking about her personal life with a teacher that shared her race. She commented:

"And umm, I think too, it could be a-a race thing too...Going to her, going-feeling more comfortable with certain things because Carla is there...I guess as a human being you're going to go with what you feel is most comfortable."

Material goods. (Percent agreement between coders: 98.59. Mentioned by 3 teachers and 1 parent). Material goods were defined as possessions needed by the child in childcare (i.e., formula, diapers, clothes, etc.). A majority of the time that material possessions were mentioned, it was generally seen as a negative influence on the parent-teacher relationship. Material possessions were typically mentioned more by teachers than by parents. One teacher expressed challenges when dealing with material goods in this example:

If they're, in need of clothing, an stuff like that, like some of the parents get upset if we say, "You need diapers..." They're like, "Oh, well I jus' brought so many diapers.." Like, "I didn't steal your diapers, your baby used em!

One parent discussed a situation where the teachers misplaced her material possessions.

The parent explains:

He just didn't have his one-sie on but I had-it was a different one-sie. And I was taken back. I was like, "okay, what happened to it?" and we still haven't found that one-sie..."well, where's it at?" You know, "my money's kind of tight. I need

to know." I guess it got misplaced or whatever...That was the only time I've ever had any [interactions that did not go well].

This is an example from a teacher's interview of one instance where material possessions had a positive affect on a parent-teacher relationship:

"And you know we've helped her...get diapers and things like that, so now she can bring her child and not worry about diapers if she doesn't have the money for em we always have a backup...set aside for her cause it makes her feel better."

Teacher-child relationship impacts the parent-teacher relationship. (Percent agreement between coders: 96.18. Mentioned by 5 teachers and 6 parents). Teachers and parents also sometimes noted how the relationship between the teacher and the child impacted the parent-teacher relationship. If a teacher's relationship with a child was seen as positive by the parent than the parent-teacher relationship was generally positively affected. One parent participant, said:

Sometimes she calls her mom, which doesn't bother me ...she knows who I am as a mom. So if she feels comfortable calling her mom, 'cause she doesn't call everybody mom...then obviously she's doing something very well. So, I don't have any complaints at all-what so ever.

This idea that there is a connection between teacher relationships with children and teachers' relationships with parents was also seen for the opposite, if a teacher's relationship with a child was seen as unsatisfactory by the parent than the parent-teacher relationship seemed to be negatively affected. One parent described this discrepancy with a teacher:

We did have some, um some issues or a little while back ...um child's a very

affectionate, and very emotionally needy child...I don't know if, ah she and teacher hit it off, so we had to work on her relationship with the teacher... to make sure that she felt emotionally taken care of ...because the teacher wouldn't hold her, would not pick her up, wouldn't ... or was like, 'Well, you're a big girl, you need to...', well...she's not being picked up to be lazy...she wants to be picked up to know that she is being supportive...And that she can trust you.

In addition, one parent felt that having a negative relationship with the teacher would potentially negatively affect her child. This parent mentions:

I may not express it directly to the teacher like ask somebody else first just because obviously to me the relationship between me and my child's teacher is very important and I don't want to ruin that and have it affect my child.

Although no parents discussed feeling jealous towards teachers, one teacher spoke about her feelings that parents experience jealousy when they see their child embracing the teacher more than them:

"A lot of times I think the parents... [feel] a little jealousy... because their babies are here with us all this time and but their still their babies and home with them even more time so they're like don't tell me, don't act like you know my child better than I do...I have one parent her child...every morning she would come in the door and run down the hall "Kyla"... and moms was like I'm getting ready to leave and she was like bye. She's like can I get a kiss? You give Kyla all of these kisses. So that's why I'm like...I think a little bit a jealousy plays a part."

Age of child impacts parent-teacher relationship. (Percent agreement between coders: 92.94. Mentioned by 7 teachers and 1 parent). Many of the participants felt that

because of the young age of the children, parent-teacher relationships were different from relationships among parents and teachers of older children. A teacher explains why she feels these relationships vary at different ages:

“Between a parent and a teacher in particularly younger children, infants and toddlers, I think it’s more intimate relationship maybe than, ah, then if you are meeting the parent when the child is say three years old... You’ve got a more intimate relationship if you meet them when the children are younger. And that’s basically because, there’s a lot of detailed information that parents need to know when the children are younger, such as diaper changes, ah, feeding, what they ate, when they ate...how many times they went to the bathroom. Those are all, those are all, that’s all information that younger parents want and need, for the care of their children. Whereas, when the child becomes three, it would be a different kind of relationship.”

Discussion

This study, designed to gain insight on infant or toddler parent-teacher relationships, examined dyadic relationships between paired families and early childhood educators. The goal of this study was to understand parent-teacher relationships in order to recognize necessary improvements that need to be made in order to provide all children and families with the best possible care. The findings provide a better understanding of one essential part of parent-teacher relationships, communication, as well as factors that influence parent-teacher relationships in both positive and negative ways. Parents and teachers expressed the necessity of good communication when establishing a relationship in a childcare setting. Teachers and parents were interested in

seeking information from the other to provide better care for the focal child. Intentional sharing of information was a strategy used, by teachers, to invite communication and comfort parents. By using multiple strategies (i.e., email, phone calls, and daily sheets) teachers and parents were able to effectively communicate the many different topics they typically discussed (i.e., behavior, development, and potty training). Significant influences that emerged from the interviews included staffing structure, differential relationships between teacher participants and other parents or parent participants and other teachers, and the young age of the focal children.

It is significant that 17 out of the 18 total parent and teacher participants viewed good, open communication as important when establishing a relationship in a childcare setting. This demonstrates that teachers and parents understand one key element needed to develop a true partnership with one another. McGrath's (2007) research conducted on parent-teacher relationships studied all aspects of daily interactions and the meaning of these interactions in regards to specific mother-teacher relationships. McGrath (2007) found that for some families, partnerships between infant and toddler parents and teachers are difficult to form due to the inability to develop open communication. Our study confirmed that parents and teachers have an understanding that open communication helps build effective, well-functioning relationships, but also that many of the participants felt they had open communication within their particular relationship.

Teachers typically used a communication strategy of intentionally sharing information in order to invite communication. Teachers would share information with parents in order to demonstrate open communication and make parents feel more comfortable. This provides evidence that teachers feel they hold the responsibility for

making parents feel comfortable and at ease. Reedy and McGrath (2010) created a three-part communication cycle of effective communication practices between parents and teachers, as seen by center directors. One component of the communication cycle includes open bi-directional communication (Reedy et al., 2010). Reedy and McGrath define this type of communication as “purposeful” and “an honest conveyance of information”, meaning the responsibility lies on the teacher to be forthcoming with information in order to provide parents with full disclosure as well as remaining receptive to all information shared with the teacher by the parent. The results show that teachers have an understanding that open bi-directional communication is necessary in order to overcome challenges with parents and form high-quality relationships (Reedy et al., 2010). The desire for such bi-directional communication was also evident in the fact that both parents and teachers wanted information from each other and comments from them emphasizing that appropriate care is dependent on the openness of communication.

Several topics were discussed between parents and teachers (e.g. behavior, development, and potty training). Because there are so many topics that are discussed multiple strategies for communicating these topics must be available (e.g. email, phone calls, and conferences). These strategies are necessary in order to establish and maintain open communication, which was something that many participants valued. Many participants mentioned having the ability to contact the teacher at any point in the day by phone call, text, or email. Being able to contact one another at any point in the day provides a level of comfort for both parents and teachers. The results from this study align with Reedy and McGrath's (2010) views that successful communication between parents and teachers occur when information is spoken, documented, heard. This is

significant because it shows that both parents and teacher participants are striving to create open, effective relationships by using successful communication strategies. Since parents and teachers demonstrate awareness of how open communication is established through multiple communication strategies, the next step consists of being supported by staffing policies that provides teachers with the time, space and technology to have this type of rich communication with parents.

The staffing and center policies proved to support as well as hinder families and teachers ability to communicate effectively. Parents and teachers spoke positively about having multiple staff members working in a room. Participants felt this allowed more opportunities for communication during either pick-up and drop-off times or during the day to send an email or answer a phone call. However, some participants noted an opposite arrangement; some felt that the hours and staffing availability did not align with when parents were picking up and dropping off, decreasing parents' and teachers' ability to communicate and ultimately develop an effective relationship. Time was frequently seen as a negative influence on parent-teacher relationships when parents or teachers would express that they did not have enough time to communicate or participate in scheduled activities. Although it is noted that certain policies cannot be changed due to funding and other details, in all, staffing structures should be set up so the greatest number of opportunities for parents and teachers to communication is made possible.

Overall, parents and teachers of infant and toddler age children viewed their parent-teacher relationships as different from relationships among parents and teachers of older children. The NAEYC (2006) indicates that the younger the child is, the more crucial it is for teachers to obtain certain information from families. Parents and teachers

of infants and toddlers may feel their relationships are unique because the extensive list of topics that is discussed between parents and teachers exceeds the topics discussed by primary education teachers and parents. This supports Reedy and McGrath's finding that one of the main differences between a childcare setting and a formal primary education setting is parent-teacher communication (2010).

Parents also indicated feeling that their relationships with teachers were different from other parents' relationships with teachers. This occurred generally in instances where parents felt other parents were not as interested in what their child was doing in school, and that these other parents would be in-and-out with little to no information exchange between parent and teacher. Teachers also recognized that parents sometimes were uninterested in forming relationships with teachers. Although this proved to be challenging for teachers, they generally used strategies such as intentionally sharing information, persistently approaching parents, and remaining personable to invite communication from parents. Teachers mainly spoke about having differential relationships with parents when there were personality factors that made them different (i.e., parents are guarded versus personable and open). Typically, teachers are encouraged to treat each parent equally and form the same relationship with each parent (Reedy & McGrath, 2010), however, a majority of the teacher participants felt that their relationships were not all the same. Teachers often expressed that because individuals have different personalities each relationship with a parent is unique.

Personal and family factors proved to be a major influence on parent-teacher relationships. Parents' and teachers' personalities were mentioned throughout the parent and teacher interviews as positively and negatively affecting relationships. Some parents

and teachers felt that the paired participant's personality conflicted with their own, whereas some felt their personalities meshed well. Parents and teachers highlighted instances in which personalities were conflicting in situations where parents were more reserved than the teacher or the teacher was not as nurturing as the parent. Bernhard (1998) conducted a study of parent-teacher interactions for the purpose of measuring the complexity of parent-teacher relationships. Bernhard's (1998) findings suggested that a greater societal problem of differing social classes created differences in beliefs and values that make a true partnership between parents and educators difficult to form. Assigning primary caregivers based on the similarities, such as personality types, among parents and teachers could potentially eliminate certain negative experiences.

Many participants mentioned being paired with a primary caregiver. A primary caregiver is typically defined as the teacher to which a particular child is assigned in order to ensure that each child has someone primarily responsible for their care. Parent participants that were assigned primary caregivers expressed feeling closer to these teachers because they had more interactions and communication with each other. Neither parents nor teachers described in-depth how primary caregivers are assigned at their center, though one participant noted the director or coordinator assigned them. As many participants noted explicitly or implicitly how they felt personal or family factors influenced parent-teacher relationships, a more effective approach for assigning primary caregivers might involve trying to match teachers and parents based on personality or other relevant personal factors.

This study was designed to analyze parent-teacher dyads, meaning researchers had to secure a teacher participant and a parent participant that worked together in the

same classroom. This research design may have naturally elicited more positive responses, as participants all voluntarily agreed to be interviewed about a specific parent-teacher relationship. Our findings must also be interpreted relative to our particular sample of focus, parent-teacher relationships in families who were currently receiving subsidized childcare for their infant or toddler enrolled full time. In addition, the majority of the participants in this study were female; with only one father participating. It would be beneficial for future research to examine any differences between mother-teacher relationships and father-teacher relationships.

The findings from this study provide a better understanding of one essential part of parent-teacher relationships, communication, as well as factors that influence parent-teacher relationships both positively and negatively. Overall, parents and teachers have an understanding that open communication helps build effective, well-functioning relationships. Parents and teachers demonstrate a desire for open bi-directional communication as well as awareness that open communication is established through multiple communication strategies. Having a desire for open communication and the understanding that open communication is important is an area where parents and teachers are excelling. Parents and teachers of infants and toddlers may feel their relationships are unique because the extensive list of topics that parents and teachers discuss with one another exceeds the topics discussed by primary education teachers and parents. Improvements should be made to center environments and staffing structures so the largest amount of opportunities for parents and teachers to communication is made possible. Because there was a lack of male participants further research could be done to explore relationships among teachers and fathers. Future research could also focus on

how the critical components of communication identified in this research are enacted in day-to-day exchanges between parents and teachers by observing and analyzing actual verbal and written communication in a variety of infant and toddler care settings.

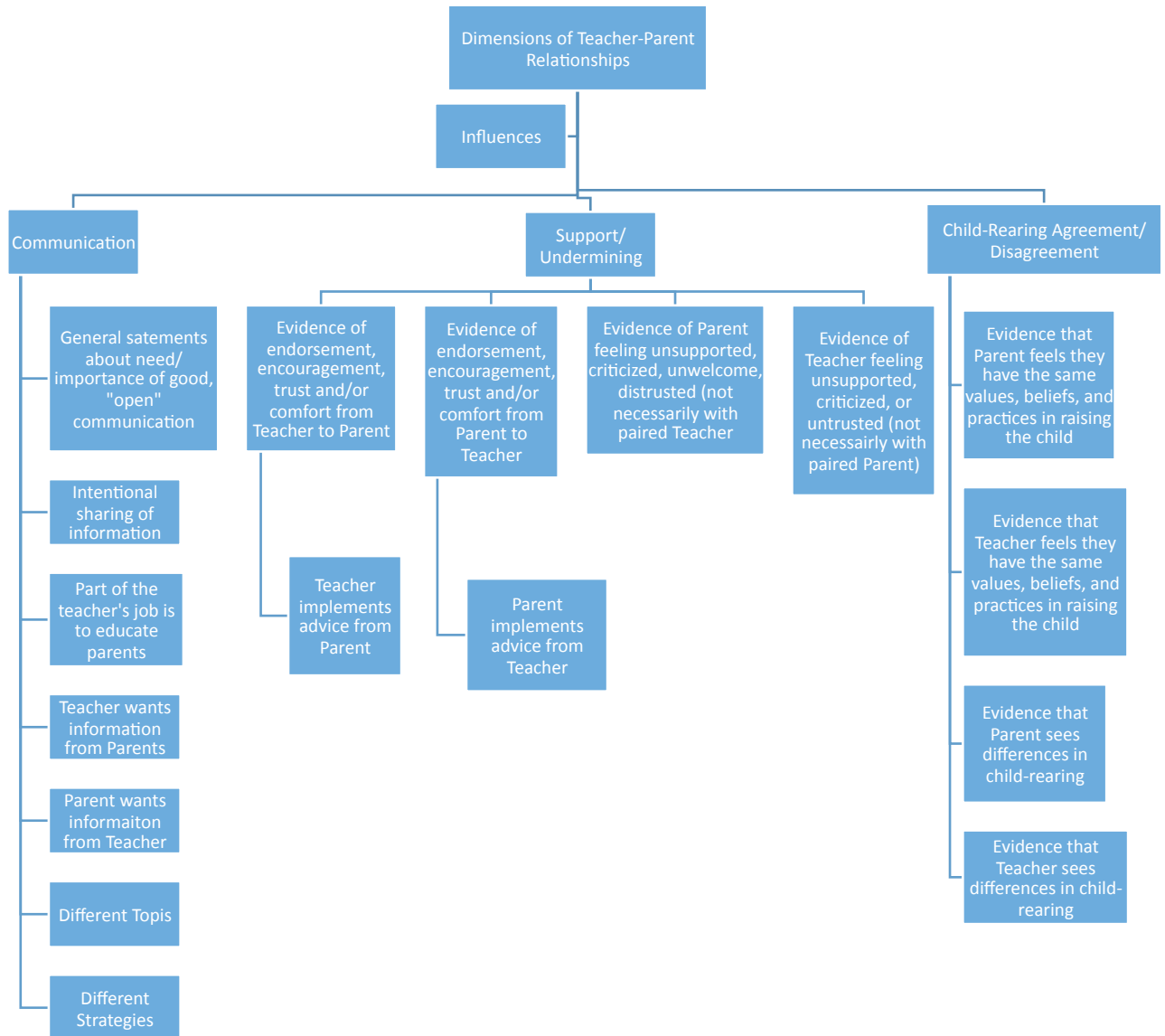
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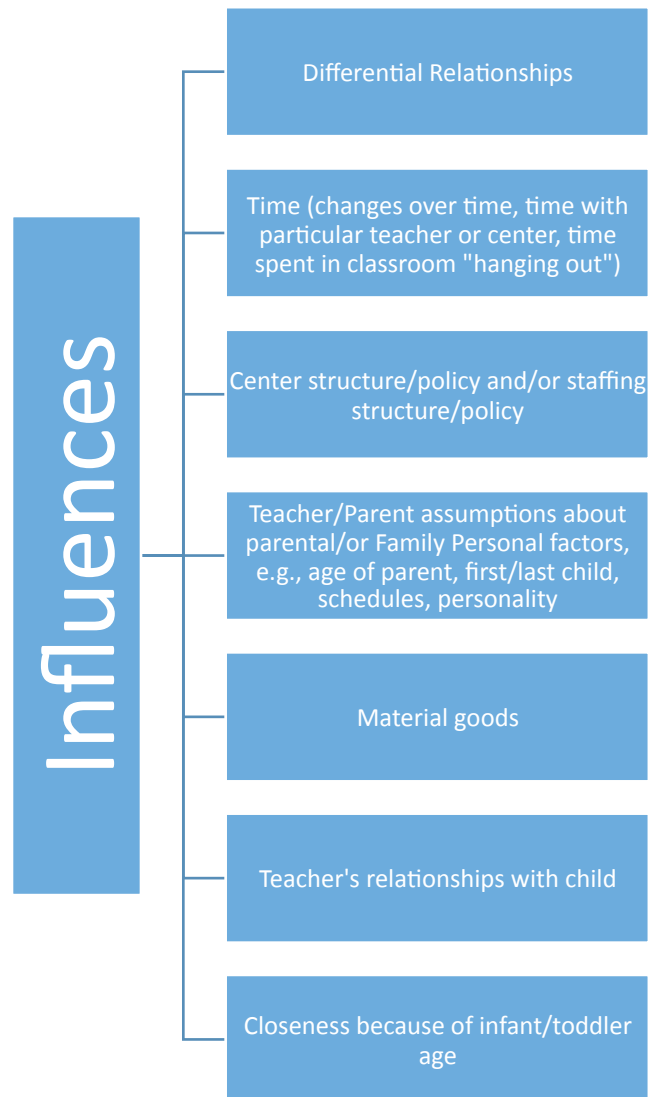
Appendix A

Figure 1: Dimensions of Teacher- Parent Relationships



Appendix B

Figure 2: Influence on the Dimensions of Teacher-Parent Relationships



Appendix C

Communication Topics

Table 1

| Communication Topics | | | |
|---|---|--|--|
| Topics Discussed <i>(Ordered from most frequently discussed to least frequently discussed)</i> | <u>Number of Parents that Mention Topic</u> | <u>Number of Teachers that Mention Topic</u> | <u>Total Number of Participants that Mention Topic</u> |
| Child's Behavior | 7 | 6 | 13 |
| Daily Life Stories | 3 | 10 | 13 |
| Child's Development | 4 | 5 | 9 |
| Potty Training | 4 | 5 | 9 |
| Personal Life | 3 | 6 | 9 |
| Child's Health | 4 | 4 | 8 |
| Child's Adjustment | 2 | 6 | 8 |
| Child Getting Hurt | 1 | 3 | 4 |

Appendix D

Communication Strategies

Table 2

| Communication Strategies | | | |
|---|---|--|--|
| Communication Strategies Mentioned <i>(Ordered from most frequently discussed to least frequently discussed)</i> | Number of Parents that Mention Communication Strategy | Number of Teachers that Mention Communication Strategy | Total Number of Participants that Mention Communication Strategy |
| In-room Conversations at Pick-up and Drop-off | 7 | 10 | 17 |
| Parents Hanging Out in the Classroom | 2 | 7 | 9 |
| Parent-Teacher Conferences | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| Phone Calls | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Including the Supervisor | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| E-mails | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| Daily Sheets | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Parent-to-Parent Opportunities | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Survey | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Questionnaires | | | |
| Sharing Artwork | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Texting | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Newsletters | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Communicating Outside of School (i.e. bus) | 1 | 0 | 1 |